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ELEMENTS OF LATE STYLE IN JOHANNES BRAHMS'S SONATA IN F MINOR
FOR CLARINET AND PIANO, OP. 120, NO. 1

by
Kim Cassisa

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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Approved by

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ABSTRACT

KIM CASSISA: Elements of Late Style in Johannes Brahms's F Minor Sonata
for Clarinet and Piano Op. 120, no. 1
(Under the direction of Dr. Michael Rowlett)

This paper presents various historical, analytical, and performance perspectives of Johannes Brahms's Sonata for Clarinet and Piano in F Minor, Op. 120 No., categorizing it as a late style work. It provides a background of Brahms's life and works and places his Op. 120 in an historical context. The first part of this research focuses on late style theory and disability theory as it relates to Brahms and his significant predecessors and contemporaries. The second part of this investigation presents an overview of the sonata's structure as well as analytical perspectives of the F Minor Sonata including musical examples supporting four late style qualities prevalent in the piece— simplicity, economy, fragmentation, and reflectiveness. This section is followed by a performance analysis of recordings of the F Minor Sonata by Richard Stoltzman, Karl Leister, and Martin Fröst. This research is presented from a performer's perspective with the intention of informing other clarinetists who may study this piece of its most significant qualities.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
HISTORICAL CONTEXT.....	3
LATE STYLE.....	9
DISABILITY THEORY AND LATENESS.....	18
FORM.....	22
EVIDENCE OF LATE STYLE.....	35
PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS.....	49
CONCLUSION.....	57
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	59

INTRODUCTION

The idea of late style in composition has been studied and analyzed in the works of many composers, notably Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms, Stravinsky, and Schoenberg.

Through careful examination of music completed late in a composer's career and the qualities that differentiate these compositions from previous works, conclusions can be drawn regarding the composer's mental, emotional, and/or physical state at the time.

Inversely, because of the body of research regarding various composers and their late style works, an examination of the composer's circumstances and mental, emotional, and/or physical state can predict probable characteristics that their late works may contain. Brahms's clarinet sonatas, written in the last few years of his life, are excellent candidates for this research. Brahms's feeling of belatedness due to working in the shadow of great composers such as Beethoven and Schubert, his late stage in life, and his changing mental and emotional state at the time of the sonatas' composition point to the likelihood that they will exemplify qualities of late style.

The purpose of this research is to examine the compositional techniques in Brahms's Sonata for Clarinet and Piano in F Minor, Op. 120, No. 1 and to analyze the techniques and musical qualities that exemplify typical aspects of late style. In addition, this paper will explore the different factors that can contribute to the presence of late style in a

composition, and how these different factors apply to the case of Brahms. This research is important because there is a limited amount of available in-depth analysis of the F Minor Sonata. This paper will provide valuable insight into aspects of the music that clarinetists might consider while learning and performing this piece. For a musician who seeks to perform a piece with the greatest attention to composer's intent and qualities that define the music as a unique work, knowledge of the background and context of the piece is extremely important. An analysis of performances of the F Minor Sonata by three clarinetists of different styles is included in this paper to show how each performer addresses important aspects of the music. With this analysis, future clarinetists studying and performing this sonata may have more guidelines to help them shape the work in a way that acknowledges and emphasizes the subtle qualities that make this piece significant.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Johannes Brahms was born on May 7, 1833 in Hamburg, Germany to Johann Jakob Brahms and Johanna Nissen. Brahms was exposed to music at a young age by his father, who played several string and wind instruments. Although financial struggles were an issue in the family, Brahms's parents cared deeply for him and his two siblings and provided the young Brahms with music lessons, beginning with piano at age seven. He earned money playing piano for private and public performances, teaching piano lessons, and arranging music for piano and chamber groups. German romantic poetry and novels, folklore and folk music, Renaissance music, and Hungarian and Gypsy style were of great interest to Brahms and influenced many of his works. The first of Brahms's surviving compositions dates from about 1851, but there is evidence that he began writing a few years earlier, mostly for piano. In 1853, Brahms was introduced by his friend and violinist Joseph Joachim to Robert and Clara Schumann, with whom he developed a strong, complex, and long-lasting relationship. Even after Robert's mental breakdown, attempted suicide, and resulting death in an insane asylum in 1856, Brahms maintained a close relationship with Clara. Brahms took a hiatus from releasing new compositions that same year, and resumed at the end of 1860.¹

¹ *Grove Music Online*, s.v. "Brahms, Johannes," accessed October 1, 2017, <https://doi-org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.51879>.

During the 1860's Brahms wrote multiple chamber works, pieces for piano, songs and vocal works, and a requiem mass which he began shortly after the death of his mother. During the 1870's Brahms worked for several years as music director at the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna. Notable works completed around this time include his first two symphonies in C minor and D major, respectively. Composers writing symphonies in this period faced the common challenge of writing in the wake of the master of symphonic composition, Beethoven. Beethoven's expansion of the symphony to unprecedented lengths, the use of programmatic titles and material, and thematic connections between movements were innovations in the genre that set a seemingly unattainable standard for future composers. Brahms was born only six years after Beethoven's death in 1827, and constant comparison to Beethoven was inevitable. This sense of belatedness due to the looming precedent of Beethoven's massive contributions followed Brahms throughout his life and contributed to the late style found in his works. In the next decade he also completed a number of orchestral and chamber works including a violin concerto, two violin sonatas, a cello sonata, a string quintet, and several vocal and piano works. He continued working and traveling both as a conductor and concert pianist, and gained fame as a composer by performing his own works.²

The seven years before Brahms's death in 1897 is the most significant period for clarinetists. Despite several short-lived decisions to stop composing, he completed his most important works involving the clarinet, which remain staples of the instrument's

² *Grove Music Online*, "Johannes Brahms."

repertoire. This burst of creativity involving an instrument not previously featured in his chamber music is due largely to his introduction to the clarinet virtuoso Richard Mühlfeld.

Mühlfeld was born on February 28, 1856 in Salzungen, Germany. He studied both violin and clarinet; he played violin as a court musician in Saxe-Meiningen for six years before obtaining the position of principal clarinet. He was recognized as both a fantastic clarinetist and valuable leader within the orchestra and musical community. Mühlfeld led orchestra sectionals, conducted a male choir, and later served as music director of the court theater. He remained in Meiningen until his death in 1907, despite offers from other prestigious orchestras. In 1891, Brahms visited Meiningen and privately heard Mühlfeld play two of the major works in the repertoire for clarinet, the Weber and Mozart concertos. Brahms was entranced by both his virtuosity and the beauty of the sound of the clarinet itself. Being primarily a pianist, Brahms had never before truly appreciated the different colors capable of an instrument like the clarinet. He began to consider the opportunities this could provide for composition, particularly when played by someone as talented as Mühlfeld. His friendship with Mühlfeld and his new infatuation with the timbral possibilities of the clarinet drew Brahms out from his compositional hiatus and inspired him to write his Clarinet Trio in A Minor, Op. 114 and Quintet in B Minor, Op. 115. Brahms returned to Meiningen at the end of the year to rehearse his new

compositions, and they were first premiered publically in Berlin. The works received positive critical reception, particularly the quintet.³

Brahms took yet another break from composing in the following years due to several troubling events that affected his morale and caused him to acknowledge his aging. Two of Brahms's closest friends died in 1892, and three more died within a three-month period in 1894. He was offered the position of music director of the Hamburg Philharmonic, but rejected it, ending his curt reply with

Had things gone according to my wish, I might today be celebrating my jubilee with you, while you would be, as you are today, looking for a capable younger man. May you find him soon, and may he work in your interest with the same good will, the same modest degree of ability, and the same wholehearted zeal, as would have been done by yours very sincerely,

J. Brahms⁴

In the summer of 1894, Brahms again was encouraged by Mühlfeld to resume composing and completed his Clarinet Sonatas, Op. 120. The Sonata in F Minor is the focus of this paper and consists of four movements; the Sonata in Eb Major contains three movements.

³ *Grove Music Online*, s.v. "Mühlfeld, Richard," accessed October 1, 2017, <https://doi-org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.19300>.

⁴ Jan Swafford, *Johannes Brahms: a biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 595.

These sonatas were first presented to the public in Vienna in January of 1895, and were performed by Mühlfeld and Brahms himself. Several months before the public premiere, Brahms went to visit Clara Schumann at her home and rehearsed the sonatas with Mühlfeld. At this time, Brahms's intensifying depression and loneliness became even more pronounced. One of Clara's daughters remarked, "I do not believe that Brahms looked upon the piano as a dear, trusted friend, as my mother did, but considered it a necessary evil."⁵ He also was prone to angry outbursts aimed at those closest to him, once yelling at the Schumann family, "I have no friends! If anybody tells you he is my friend, don't believe him!"⁶

During this decade, Brahms began to realize he was nearing the end of his life, and elements of late style became more apparent in his works. As described above, Brahms ceased writing music twice during this time, believing his career as a composer to be at an end. He abandoned several beginning sketches for symphonic works, and never completed them. Clara, Brahms's closest friend, died in May of 1896. Before her death, he wrote a reflective collection of four songs for bass and piano, based on text from the Bible focusing on life and death. Shortly after her death, Brahms wrote his final work, 11 Chorale Preludes, Op. 122. These organ preludes are based on Christian hymns and, like his songs for bass and piano, reflect on the beauty of life and the imminence of death.

⁵ Swafford. *Johannes Brahms*, 597.

⁶ Ibid.

The next year Brahms was diagnosed with liver cancer, and he passed away on April 3, 1897.⁷

⁷ *Grove Music Online*, “Brahms, Johannes.”

LATE STYLE

Works written or completed within the final stage of a composer's life tend to share certain traits that stylistically distinguish these compositions from those of previous periods. Interestingly, different composers' late-period works generally share similar characteristics. Some of the most common qualities include nostalgia, fragmentation, conciseness, introversion, extreme emotion, simplicity, and alienation.⁸ This aesthetic pattern among late works of different composers has collectively been dubbed "late style." German philosopher Theodor Adorno was the first and most influential writer to delve into the implications of late style and to attempt to explain its presence in his *Essays on Music*. Adorno's writing focuses on the works of Beethoven, one of the most prominent examples of a composer whose late style differs significantly from that of his earlier works. Adorno's writing serves as a foundation upon which writers have continued to build, adding more composers, works, and recurring traits of late style. In addition to Beethoven, late works of Mozart, Schumann, and Brahms have been the source for much analysis and examination. In this chapter, late works by these four major composers will serve as examples of how the qualities of late style can be identified in

⁸ Joseph N. Straus, "Disability and 'Late Style' in Music," *The Journal of Musicology* 25, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 12, accessed January 16, 2018.

preparation for an analysis of late style characteristics in Brahms's Clarinet Sonata in F Minor.

Adorno's chapter on Beethoven's late style is extremely dense, with nearly every sentence containing ideas that have since been extracted to understand late style in other composers. He begins his chapter with an analogy that introduces the idea of late style as harsh, primitive, and even painful.

The maturity of the late works of significant artists does not resemble the kind one finds in fruit. They are, for the most part, not round, but furrowed, even ravaged. Devoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny, they do not surrender themselves to mere delectation. They lack all the harmony that the classicist aesthetic is in the habit of demanding from works of art, and they show more traces of history than of growth. The usual view explains this with the argument that they are products of an uninhibited subjectivity, or, better yet, "personality," which breaks through the envelope of form to better express itself, transforming harmony into the dissonance of its suffering, and disdaining sensual charms with the sovereign self-assurance of the spirit liberated.⁹

⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, "Late Style in Beethoven," in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 564.

Adorno stresses that works of late Beethoven often allude to death and fate; as the composer nears the end of his life, charming artistry is abandoned to make way for the reality he now faces. Beethoven's String Quartet in C# minor, Op. 131, No. 14 is described by Adorno as one of the most prominent examples of late style. The quartet was completed in 1826, shortly before Beethoven's death in March of 1827. Expressive moments within this work include sections of a "serene, almost idyllic tone." This longing, nostalgic character is one of the most common qualities found in late style works of Beethoven as well as other composers. Adorno also references fragmentation, another common quality of late style, while describing the contrasting more peaceful "pieces" within the harsher portions of the work; later, he mentions the scattered "formulas and phrases of convention" which can be seen throughout Beethoven's late piano sonatas. Adorno remarks upon the conciseness and austerity exemplified in Beethoven's Piano Sonata in Ab Major, Op. 110, No. 31 written in 1821. Adorno describes the sixteenth-note accompaniment to the first movement's principal theme as "unabashedly primitive" among "restrained stirrings of solitary lyricism." Simplicity and economy are among the defining characteristics of late style music, which stand in contrast with technical complexity found in Beethoven's works of the early and middle period.¹⁰

With life expectancy being only 30-40 years in Beethoven's time, it is unsurprising that by the year 1815, when the transition to his third and final compositional period began, Beethoven was starting to truly think about his own death and realize he did not have

¹⁰ Adorno, *Late Style in Beethoven*, 564-567.

much remaining time to produce art. Beethoven's deafness also intensified during this time, a factor which likely further contributed to the development of his late style. His disability as an alternative or additional factor for his shift in compositional style will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

Like Beethoven, Mozart began writing in the late style while still relatively young by today's standards; he died at age 35, and the development of his late style is considered to have begun in the last ten years of his life. It has been noted that works composed by Mozart in this time featured "leaner, more transparent textures and a less ornamental manner."¹¹ The first of Mozart's late symphonies, Symphony No. 38 in D Major, K.504, was completed in 1786. Although this work has often been considered challenging to perform and analyze because of its integration of styles,¹² it contains simple, beautiful lyricism and demonstrates economy through the development of simple motifs. This contradiction of complex texture with simple intent makes it a perfect consideration for late style¹³. By age thirty-three, Mozart was composing his Symphony No. 40 in G Minor, K.550, another of his late works which was completed only a few short years before his death in 1791. One of only two symphonies Mozart composed in a minor key, this work stands apart stylistically from his earlier compositions and serves as one of the

¹¹ *Grove Music Online*, s.v. "Mozart, (Johann Chrysostom) Wolfgang Amadeus," accessed January 16, 2018, <https://doi-org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.6002278233>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Straus, "Disability and 'Late Style' in Music," 8.

landmark symphonies that show the shift into his late style. Writers have remarked upon the symphony's "intensity, unconventionality, chromaticism, thematic working-out, abundance of ideas, and ambiguity."¹⁴ Asymmetry (seen in the treatment of a regular melodic line over changing accompaniment) and unexpected silences in the first movement can be seen as evidence of Mozart's movement into a late style. Carruthers remarks upon the phrase treatment between measure 1 and 43, "...a conventional, symmetrical superstructure is erected upon an unconventional asymmetrical substructure."¹⁵ The ambiguity, including the subtle transition from development to recapitulation found in this work¹⁶, is yet another trait expected from late style works.

Robert Schumann is another composer whose late style has been the source of much speculation. Approximately a third of all his musical works were produced between 1850, when he moved to Düsseldorf, and his attempted suicide just four years later.

Schumann's physical and emotional state likely influenced his compositional style as much as his age. His mental and physical deterioration as additional causes for his late style will be discussed in the next chapter. Schumann's final composition, Requiem, Op. 148, exemplifies his shift to a new style by the end of his life. His earlier works were mostly for piano, but late in his life he began to compose for larger ensembles, with more

¹⁴ Neal Alexander Zaslav, *Mozart's symphonies: context, performance practice, reception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 436.

¹⁵ Glen Carruthers, "Strangeness and Beauty: The Opening Measure of Mozart's Symphony in G Minor, K550," *The Journal of Musicology* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 295-297, accessed January 18, 2018.

¹⁶ Ibid.

works for full orchestra and orchestra with chorus. The Requiem is quite accessible and one critic remarked following its premiere, “only in certain movements, such as the *Dies irae*, do the inspiration and execution approach the highest levels of the composer’s genius . . . Nevertheless, the work is well worth hearing and the music is nowhere difficult to follow.”¹⁷ The Requiem’s somber simplicity, use of ancient sacred material and lack of convention in composition distinguish this work from Schumann’s earlier style.¹⁸

Brahms is considered to have transitioned to his third or late compositional period by the mid-1880’s. One of the characteristics significant of his chamber works written during this time is their accessibility to the general public. Although Brahms’s previous works were often complex and appealed to other educated musicians, they were certainly not what the layperson in the audience might consider to be easy listening. The Piano Trio in C Minor, Op. 101, completed in 1886, was reviewed the following year by German critic Richard Pohl who acknowledged the distinguishing accessibility of this work as compared to Brahms’s previous chamber music.

Salient features of this work are the conciseness of its forms, at least in the last three movements, and a certain striving for easy intelligibility—for popularity, if one may speak in this way about Brahms . . . The trio, to be sure, does not belong

¹⁷ Laura Tunbridge, *Schumann’s Late Style* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 63.

¹⁸ Ibid. 59-68.

to the most distinguished chamber music works by Brahms, but it is balanced in mood throughout and readily understood even on first hearing.¹⁹

This comment highlights two features common to late style works— simplicity and conciseness. This transition into a new style, although clearly recognized as new and different, was obviously not seen as strictly positive. Like many other composers, particularly including Beethoven and Schumann, contemporary reception of Brahms's late works was often negative. This can be seen in Pohl's criticism that the Trio in C Minor does not belong in the same category as Brahms's previous chamber music, despite its popularity and greater accessibility. This perception of the shift to late style as an indicator of decline in old age is common as an initial misunderstanding of works completed in a composer's late period. It is often not until after the composer's death that reevaluation of a late compositional style takes place.²⁰

Some of the most important of Brahms's late works are his chamber works involving clarinet. Certainly Brahms's introduction to Mühlfeld was a huge factor in his decision to begin writing for clarinet, but his use of a new instrument also points to the fact that he was interested in experimenting with new modes of expression; his acquaintance with Mühlfeld provided him with the perfect outlet for exploring a new sound in his chamber works. Themes of isolation and introversion are prevalent in his Trio in A Minor, Op.

¹⁹ Margaret Notely, *Lateness and Brahms: Music and Culture in the Twilight of Viennese Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 47.

²⁰ Notely, *Lateness and Brahms*, 37-71.

114, for clarinet, cello, and piano, written in 1891. Sparseness and coldness are terms critics have used to describe this work due to its simple, straightforward themes without the elaboration and showiness seen in his earlier works, particularly in the first movement. Use of counterpoint and imitation stand out in contrast to his earlier style. Other composers too have shifted to frequent use of counterpoint late in life, including Mozart and Beethoven. This late use of counterpoint is also related to the late style trait of looking back to the past and making fresh use of older styles, especially contrapuntal technique reminiscent of earlier composers like J.S. Bach. Brahms also incorporates plagal cadences, even in extremely unusual moments like the ending cadence of the exposition, to give this movement a primitive sound. This archaic mood produced exemplifies the sense of alienation and separation from the time.²¹

The Quintet, Op. 115 was completed the same year as the trio and calls for clarinet, two violins, viola, and cello. The thicker instrumentation gives this work a very different sound than the trio; whereas textural simplicity and plainness of lyricism are achieved more easily by a smaller ensemble, the quintet's elements of late style are found more in economy of material and experimentation with form. The first movement relies on motivic transformation, with most of the movement developing the sextuplet turn figure appearing in the first measure and seen at the end of the clarinet's first phrase. The element of economy can be seen in transformation of one motif throughout the entire movement instead of clear, separated themes. Experimentation with form is another

²¹ Notely, *Lateness and Brahms*, 90-97.

quality present in the quintet. Although the first movement follows a basic sonata-form structure, it processes fantastical and improvisatory qualities due to the continual thematic development which blur the formal distinctions usually found within sonata-form.²²

Qualities representing late style can vary by composer and type of composition, but many late style works share general characteristics of alienation, introspection, nostalgia, austerity, simplicity, economy, withdrawal, and fragmentation. These qualities appear in the works of a composer as a result of a change in perspective, usually due to aging and the inevitable knowledge of death. Additional factors, however, can be responsible for a sudden shift in compositional style. Identification of any physical, mental, and emotional states of the composer can help more precisely identify reasons for stylistic change. The next chapter explores disability theory, which can provide more specific explanation for change in compositional style.

²² Rose Rosengard Subotnik, “Tonality, Autonomy, and Competence in Post-Classical Music,” *Critical Inquiry* 6, no. 1 (Autumn 1979): 160-161, accessed January 18, 2018.

DISABILITY THEORY AND LATENESS

Since Adorno's time, those interested in the study of late style have expanded on its parameters and offered alternative or additional causes for the presence of these shared qualities. Joseph N. Straus is one of the foremost researchers in this field and offers a new approach to understanding late style. Straus focuses on those composers who do not strictly meet the guidelines of lateness or historical belatedness expected for those composing in the late style. Rather than limiting causes to these two most obvious factors, Straus offers disability in the form of mental or physical deterioration or disorder as a possible cause for late style. He emphasizes that disability theory is not to be used simply as substitution, but rather as a way to more fully understand late works and better account for late style qualities. Straus expands on the definition of late style, stating that "late style works are those that represent nonnormative mental and bodily states,"²³ rather than only those representing aging or belatedness.

Beethoven and Schumann are two composers who clearly exemplify how this expanded understanding of late works can be applied. Beethoven's hearing began to intensely worsen about the same time as his third compositional period began, and his deafness can be seen as a more complete explanation for his shift in style. This physical disability

²³ Straus, "Disability and 'Late Style' in Music," 12.

caused a change in his perception of the world, and therefore affected the art he produced. Many of the defining characteristics considered to be frequently found in late style works are in fact physical, bodily descriptors applied more subjectively to music, such as fragmentation, thinness, spinness, and compactness. Straus points out that these shared qualities between music and physicality may point both to the fact that composers themselves abstractly manifest their own physical experience in the music they create, and that listeners aware of composers' states impose this knowledge on the music, therefore perceiving it to have these qualities.²⁴

In addition to physical disability, mental or emotional abnormality can produce the effects of late style. Schumann suffered from physical ailments but also experienced intense mental deterioration throughout his life, namely depression which severely increased in his later years to the point of attempted suicide. His late works were mostly met with poor reception by contemporary critics; a greater appreciation only more recently developed due to a fuller understanding of Schumann's mental state which drove the shift to his new style. Like physical attributes, emotional states are often used to describe abstract qualities of music. Introversion, detachment, alienation, reflectiveness, and nostalgia are some of the most common emotional qualities attributed to late style works.

²⁴ Straus, "Disability and 'Late Style' in Music," 6,

Brahms's foremost indicators of late style were his physical aging and sense of belatedness as a composer working in the shadow of Beethoven, but disability theory allows for a more complete understanding of how other factors may have influenced his style. Because Brahms was relatively healthy throughout most of his life, less research exists regarding his physical and mental medical history than those composers whose extreme conditions all but defined them, like Beethoven and Schumann. Brahms developed jaundice in 1896 and ultimately died from pancreatic cancer. Modern researchers have used information available today to hypothesize the presence of other medical conditions in Brahms that may not have been diagnosable during his lifetime. One of these conditions is sleep apnea, a chronic disorder which disrupts breathing during sleep. Observations by his contemporaries include excessive napping, even in public places, and loud snoring. Other associated conditions observed in Brahms, including weight gain, alcoholism, and moodiness support this theory as well, as all are linked to sleep apnea. In his journal article regarding this possible explanation for some of Brahms's behaviors, Margolis comments, "One wonders if the disorder contributed to lifelong alienation from friends and marriage ("fetters" according to Brahms) thereby indirectly nurturing his determined devotion to the creation of his immortal music."²⁵ Not only may this condition may have been partly responsible for his alienation and therefore for the desire to compose, but his sense of alienation from society and close

²⁵ Mitchell L. Margolis, "Brahms' Lullaby Revisited: Did the Composer Have Obstructive Sleep Apnea?" *Chest* 118, issue 1 (July 2000): 212, accessed February 26, 2018.

ones may have inadvertently seeped into his music and created the effects characteristic of late style or disability style.

The conditions of obesity, alcoholism, and mood swings which are sometimes associated with sleep apnea should also be addressed as their own independent conditions which may have influenced his writing style. Brahms was relatively thin throughout most of his life, but increasingly gained weight in his later years, up until the point his final illness caused sudden weight loss. Brahms was a heavy drinker throughout his life. His excessive consumption and frequent visits to taverns in his later years alarmed those close to him, especially Clara Schumann. His moodiness was a prominent part of his personality; Margolis introduces the article with a quote from Brahms demonstrating his rather disagreeable side, “If there is anyone here I have not offended, I apologize.” He was known for his frequent mood swings and outbursts of anger toward his close ones.²⁶ Whether or not his isolation, excessive alcohol consumption, changes in weight, and irritability were related to sleep apnea is uncertain, but these symptoms certainly are associated with depression. The likelihood of sleep apnea and undiagnosed depression may have influenced his writing style as much as the qualities like aging and belatedness typically associated with late style. Using disability theory to recognize factors influencing style or causing a change in style and allows for a broader understanding of late style and the musical qualities that accompany it.

²⁶ Margolis, “Brahms’ Lullaby Revisited,” 210-212.

FORM

Movement I

The first movement of the F Minor Sonata, *allegro appassionato*, features in miniature what is achieved by the work as a whole: a transformation from F minor to F major. This is seen on a large scale between movements I and IV, and on a smaller scale between the beginning and ending of movement I, particularly in the transformation of the Primary Theme from its first to final statement and in the introductory material from its first appearance in the piano to its return in the clarinet at the end of the coda. Table 1 will help guide the listener through the different sections typical of sonata form, drawing attention to the important harmonic motion and melodic material. The piano introduction in the first four measures establishes the rhythmic and melodic cells revisited throughout the movement. The last measure of the piano introduction also foreshadows the Secondary Theme with the chromatic lowering of the G that leads to the F in the following measure. The Primary Theme is played by the clarinet three times, with the second two statements in a lower register. The sorrowful character of this theme is achieved through the melancholy of its constant descending thirds, and its boldness and passion are made possible by the clarinet's ability to smoothly play wide intervals, especially where the thirds extended to tenths.



Figure 1.1. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 1, Primary Theme mm. 5-12.



Figure 1.2. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 1, clarinet pitches present in Primary Theme mm. 5-12.

The second key area used in the exposition is Db major (VI in F minor), less typical than the V or III used most often in minor-key sonatas. Brahms uses arpeggiations in the clarinet to modulate between sections, as seen in the transition to the Secondary Theme which begins in measure 38. The piano establishes the new section with two introductory measures that return to the listener to the original introduction (measure 4) with the same notes (Ab-Gb-F) which now serve to establish the key area of Db major.



Figure 1.3. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 1, Secondary Theme mm. 38-44.

Rhythmic displacement typical of Brahms gives this section the appearance that beat 2 is the downbeat. A tonic chord in the new key is expected at the end of the Second Theme, but rather than cadencing in Db, Brahms revisits the Primary Theme with a descending third and cadences in F minor. Although separated from the key of the Secondary Theme, this recollection of the beginning is metrically shifted, relating it to the preceding theme. The closing material of the exposition begins with new *marcato* material in C minor which is alternated between the clarinet and piano, followed by a series of arpeggios which destabilize the key and lead toward a smooth descending line emphasizing the dominant. More arpeggiations follow, and the exposition cadences in C minor.

The start of the development plays with the expectations of the listener with a false start in Ab major that lands in the distant key of E major at the key change in measure 100.

The first part of the development expands upon the second theme and constantly repeats the rhythmic cell from the second measure of the piano introduction. A jarring end to the

dolce section marks a more aggressive return of the *marcato* material to transition into the recapitulation.

The recapitulation begins similarly to the start of the development. The listener is disoriented by a false cadence towards Gb major two measures before the return of the Primary Theme in which a Db dominant seventh chord leads into the return of the F minor material. Triplets are introduced into the Primary Theme in both the clarinet and piano. The recapitulation closely mirrors the exposition, but ends with a final statement of the Primary Theme which finally moves to major. The coda that follows expands upon the triplets from the last two statements of the first theme, and emphasizes a duple versus triple texture that gives this section a sense of instability and tension moves toward a final major mode conclusion. The movement ends as it began, with a return of the piano introduction echoed by the clarinet which fades off to a quiet F major triad.

A graph showing a more detailed breakdown of the melodic ideas and harmonic motion in relation to the sections typical of sonata form is included on the following pages for the first movement.

Table 1. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, Movement 1

Exposition Part I:	Primary Theme Zone	Transition	Medial Caesura	
<i>Measures:</i>	mm. 1-25	mm. 25-35	mm. 36-37	
<i>Harmonic/melodic ideas:</i>	F minor - <i>forte</i> , <i>appassionato</i>	modulatory- arpeggiations moving to Db major	Half-Cadence in Db major (V7/VI)	
Exposition Part II:	Secondary Theme Zone	Essential Expository Closure	Closing Zone	Final Cadence
	mm. 38-50	mm. 51-52	mm. 53-89	mm. 88-89
	Db major- <i>piano</i> , <i>dolce</i> , more lyrical	rather than a cadence in Db major, an echo of the Primary Theme is heard with a cadence in F min	begins with <i>marcato</i> idea (C minor) then descending line, arpeggiations lead to final cadence of exposition	C minor
Development:				
	mm. 90-99	mm. 100-115	mm. 116-135	mm. 136-137
	false start towards Ab major using material from piano intro	E major key change, expands on <i>dolce</i> material from Second Theme	returns to <i>marcato</i> material, key area unstable	F minor key change two mm. prior to recap. and false cadence Db major-Db dominant ⁷

Recapitulation Part I:	Primary Theme Zone	Transition	Medial Caesura
	mm. 138-144	mm. 146-150	mm. 151-152
	an octave lower than exposition, triplets in both clarinet and piano	syncopated descending eighth notes in clarinet	cadence on C dominant ⁷ V7-V4/2
Recapitulation Part II:	Secondary Theme Zone	Essential Structural Closure	Closing Zone
	mm. 153-165	mm. 166-167	mm. 168-203
	return of <i>piano, dolce</i> material now in F minor	tonic chord is again an echo of Primary Theme falling third figure	begins with <i>marcato</i> material in F minor, return of descending line and C major arpeggiations
			mm. 204-213
			final restatement of Primary Theme starts in F minor and moves to major
Coda:			
	mm. 214-226	mm. 227-236	
	begins in F min with new material emphasizing triplets and duple vs. triple texture	ends with a return of piano intro repeated by clarinet, moving to and ending in F major	

Movement II

The second movement in Ab major is marked *Andante un poco Adagio* and is in ternary form, or ABA structure. The simple descending melody in the clarinet is ornamented with turn figures and grace-note-like thirty-second notes.

Clarinet

poco f

Piano

poco f

Red*

Figure 1.4. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 2, mm. 1-5.

The first statement of the melody cadences on the dominant. This is immediately followed by the first repetition of the melody, this time marked *piano dolce* rather than *poco forte*, and cadences in the tonic. The B section begins at measure 23, and features more rhythmic motion in both the piano and the clarinet. The section pushes forward harmonically with the piano's arpeggiated sixteenth notes. The clarinet enters with a dotted-eighth-sixteenth figure that is returned to throughout the section, including within the main smooth, elongated, clarinet melody. The return to the A section is anticipated by the piano in measure 41 in Ab major before finally returning in the clarinet in measure

41, an octave lower than before. The repetition of the melody is played in the original range. Throughout this return to the A section the piano has a more active rhythmic role, more similar to the B section than the original A. Both the clarinet and piano reference the B section's dotted rhythm before the piece winds down with the original melody stripped down to the minimum, without any ornamentation or embellishment in either the clarinet or piano. Both instruments taper down from a pianissimo to end the movement on an Ab major chord.

Movement III

Like the previous movement, the *Allegretto grazioso* movement is in ternary form and the key of Ab major. These two movements, however, could not be more contrasting in character. The dancelike melody resembles a ländler, a type of Austrian/German folkdance in 3/4 meter. This dance was used in scherzo and minuet symphonic movements by composers such as Haydn and Mozart, and was used by Brahms in several of his songs.²⁷ The opening melody played by the clarinet in the A section transforms the rhythmic motif from the second measure of the piano's introduction in movement I into a bright, cheerful tune.

²⁷ *Grove Music Online*, s.v. "Ländler," accessed March 31, 2018, <https://doi-org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.15945>.



Figure 1.5. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 3, mm. 1-4.

After the clarinet's statement of the melody above a simple accompaniment, the piano takes over with a repeat of the same melody, while the clarinet provides simple eighth note support to fill in the piano's longer notes. The second half of the A section, starting at measure 17, begins with the clarinet playing an inversion of its original melody, this time marked *forte*.

The musical score for measures 17-20 of Brahms' Clarinet Sonata in F Minor, movement 3. The Clarinet part (treble clef) begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic, playing an inverted melody of eighth and quarter notes. The Piano part (bass clef) also begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic, playing a melody of eighth and quarter notes. The key signature is F minor (three flats) and the time signature is 3/4.

Figure 1.6. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 3, mm. 17-20.

Throughout this section, fragments of the melody are passed between clarinet and piano, but there is never a complete restatement of the original theme. This second half of the A section is framed by repeat bars, going back to a repetition of the inverted melody.

The B section of this movement is characterized by syncopation and metric displacement, characteristic of Brahms. In contrast to the dancelike character of the first theme with a strong downbeat feel, the B section opens immediately with constant descending syncopation in the right hand of the piano juxtaposed with the rather static line appearing in the clarinet's lowest register. Four bars of rest for the clarinet before another entrance disorient the listener even more as the piano continues the relentless syncopation. The piano finally ceases the syncopation and plays block chords at measure 67, when a new figure appears in the clarinet, alternating between loud and heavy and soft and *dolce* every two measures. Finally, at measure 79 the clarinet and piano move together in a long descending phrase. The piano still has the syncopated material but it complements the clarinet's line now that the two are moving with similar motion. The B section is bracketed with repeat bars, extending the syncopation for twice as long before the return to A. The return features a restatement of the first theme by the clarinet, immediately followed by a restatement in the piano. The inversion section returns without the repeat, and the movement ends with the last few bars identical to the ending of the original A section.

Movement IV

The last movement, *Vivace*, is in an altered rondo form (ABACBA), with slight alterations upon each return of the A section. This movement stands out from the others in a number of ways, one being that it begins in the written key of F major. This the first movement to abandon the four flats from the very beginning. The first three accented F's in the piano emphasize the key and are repeated by the clarinet upon later. After the clarinet establishes itself by repeating the tonic note in three octaves, the first melody begins in the clarinet. For the first time in the piece, the clarinet has staccato eighth notes marked *leggero*, or light, contrasting with the smooth phrases connected by slurs and *marcato* sections that have made up most of the work.



Figure 1.7. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 4, mm. 11-12.

The B section begins at measure 42, distinguished by quarter note triplets in both the clarinet and piano. This section is more similar to the themes found in the rest of the piece, consisting of longer slurred phrases with a gentler character.



Figure 1.8. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 4, mm. 47-49.

The return of the A section is announced by the clarinet with the three accented half notes heard in the very first measure in the piano. The C section begins in measure 119 in the piano. This theme is built off a simple dotted-quarter eighth note idea which is expanded on throughout this section. The material is handed to the clarinet in measure 123.



Figure 1.9. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 4, mm. 123-124.

The return of the B theme begins in the piano in measure 142, with the same quarter-note triplet that the clarinet began with in the original B section. The clarinet, however, plays the repeated F's for eight measures, overlapping the A and B material and hinting at the return to the first theme. The clarinet then takes over the B material for several measures before dropping out to allow the piano to transition back into the A section. The clarinet plays the repeated half note theme three times, descending in register each time, before finally announcing the true return of the A section with the original accented F's. The piece ends grandly with loud, accented chords in the piano allowing for the clarinet to shine through with a trill on the dominant followed by eighth-note triplet arpeggiations leading to an overture-like repetition of the final tonic chord in F major.

EVIDENCE OF LATE STYLE

Some scholars have commented that looking for characteristics of late style in the music of Brahms is problematic because all his music can be considered late. This presence of late qualities in much of his music likely stems from the fact that, as discussed in earlier chapters, he struggled throughout his career with the inherent lateness experienced by anyone born shortly after some of the most important composers in history. During the composition of the F Minor Sonata, however, Brahms faced additional circumstances which contributed to a change in compositional style. The loneliness and depression due to the loss of close friends as well as his old age were beginning to take a toll to the composer. These events, in addition to observable symptoms like weight gain, extreme moodiness, and alcoholism, undeniably influenced his works. There are many potential late style attributes pinpointed by scholars, and this paper will focus on those most apparent in the F Minor Sonata. These qualities are simplicity, economy, fragmentation, and reflectiveness.

Simplicity

So much of what makes this work beautiful is Brahms's ability to create moving melodies and phrases from very simple material. The first theme of movement I is a

prime example of this. The piano introduction in the first four measures prepares the listener for the upcoming theme with extremely sparse writing. Unison octaves in three registers lays out a hint of the clarinet melody that follows with mostly thirds framed by neighbor notes.



Figure 2.1. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 1, piano part, mm. 1-4.

Using only intervals of thirds and seconds in the clarinet (including those in different octaves), and without any notes outside the key of F minor, Brahms creates a fluid and expressive melody. The simple piano accompaniment of arpeggiated eighth notes in the left hand and block chords in the right hand provide harmonic support and do not detract from the simplicity of the clarinet's theme. The *marcato* idea in the closing section of the exposition is even simpler, based off a single-measure unit which is essentially a turn around the tonic. Passed between the piano and clarinet, the idea is transformed and partially inverted but never loses its inherent simplicity.

The principal theme in the second movement is also one of extreme simplicity. The decorative thirty-second notes in the first six measures and the eighth notes in the last

four ornament (mostly with turns and neighbor notes) a very plain descending melody, moving from the dominant to land on a half-cadence an octave below.



Figure 2.2. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 2, underlying clarinet melody, mm. 1-10.

The main theme of the third movement demonstrates Brahms's interest in the simple beauty of folk music. The triple meter with a strong downbeat, the steady, dance-like bass line in the piano, the ternary or song structure of the movement, and the plain nature of the clarinet's melody evokes a ländler. The clarinet's melody is based on ornamented arpeggiations on the piano harmonies, moving from the dominant to the tonic. The pickup notes on beat 3 in the right hand of the piano give the melody its solid rhythmic motion and strong beat 1. Nonchord-tones in the clarinet such as the passing tone F in the first full measure and the suspension of the upper neighbor suspended D ornament the melody. The simplicity of the tune, its straightforward rhythmic and harmonic drive, and the fact that it is the first cheerful melody heard in the sonata so far makes it one of the piece's most appealing melodies.



Figure 2.3. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 3, clarinet and piano parts, mm. 1-4.

Economy

Economical management of minimal musical material is another common aspect of late style music. Economy is found throughout this sonata in Brahms's ability to transform the same simple material within a movement (and sometimes between movements) to create new sounds. Essentially every phrase and gesture in the clarinet during the first part of the exposition in movement I is based on the thirds established in the first theme. The clarinet's second statement in measure 12 can be broken down into nothing more than a falling third figure (F# to D) reminiscent of the clarinet's very first measure (falling third of D to Bb) ornamented by upper neighbor notes and a final turn figure. The following measures consist of arpeggiations followed by another extension of a falling third with turn figures (Eb to C) in measures 19-21. This use of thirds as the basis for every phrase continues throughout the second theme until the start of the close at measure

53 which, as discussed earlier, is continuously transformed and used as the basis for the next nine measures, passed between the clarinet and piano.

Brahms also handles material across movements in an economical way. The rhythmic motif used extensively in the first movement returns in the third movement, transformed in pitch, tempo, and character to create a sound much different from the original. This rhythmic motif ultimately stems from the second measure of the piano's introduction in the first movement.



Figure 2.4. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 1, piano part, mm. 1-2.



Figure 2.5. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 1, clarinet part, mm. 7, 19, 93, 99.



Figure 2.6. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 3, mm. 1-4.

Fragmentation

Fragmentation is one of the most significant and common marks of late style. Brahms revisits fragments of previous motifs toward the end of the recapitulation in the first movement. In measure 194, Brahms begins an idea from measure 79 of the exposition, but trails off, leaving out the anticipated final tonic note.



Figure 2.7. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 1, mm. 79-81.



Figure 2.8. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 1, mm. 194-196.

Brahms allows the listener a final fragment of the first theme in measure 206, letting it sound in the clarinet for four measures in the major mode before it dissipates into a new idea, leading into the coda. The very end of the coda offers a final fragment which seems to answer the one at 206. This fragment is an echo of the end of the second measure of the piano introduction. This fragment fades off quietly and peacefully with the clarinet holding a *piano sotto voce* for three measures until the piano's final note.

The fragments discussed in the first movement were mostly fragments taken from a larger musical statement and used out of their full context, giving the end of the movement a sense of fading away. The fragments in the final movement of the sonata, however, are often individual units presented without context, then later incorporated into a more complete phrase. The first of these fragments, two slurred eighth notes followed by a note of longer duration, appears in the first entrance of the clarinet. The three notes

are not a melody or phrase by themselves, but fragments of longer line which is stated beginning in the pickups to measure 9, and is heard four times within the first theme.



Figure 2.9. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 4, mm. 5-8.

A similar use of the fragment occurs at measure 42, when clarinet has repeated fragments of the rhythm used in the melody for four measures before finally playing it in context of the full phrase. The fragment, consisting of triplet ascending octaves, is passed back and forth between clarinet and piano every two beats, but never forming a melody. These pieces of the melody sound strange before they are heard in context of the full phrase beginning at the pickups to measure 47.

The strong duple feel of the A section makes the triplet figures somewhat confusing for the listener when first heard in their fragmentary state, but sound quite lovely in context.

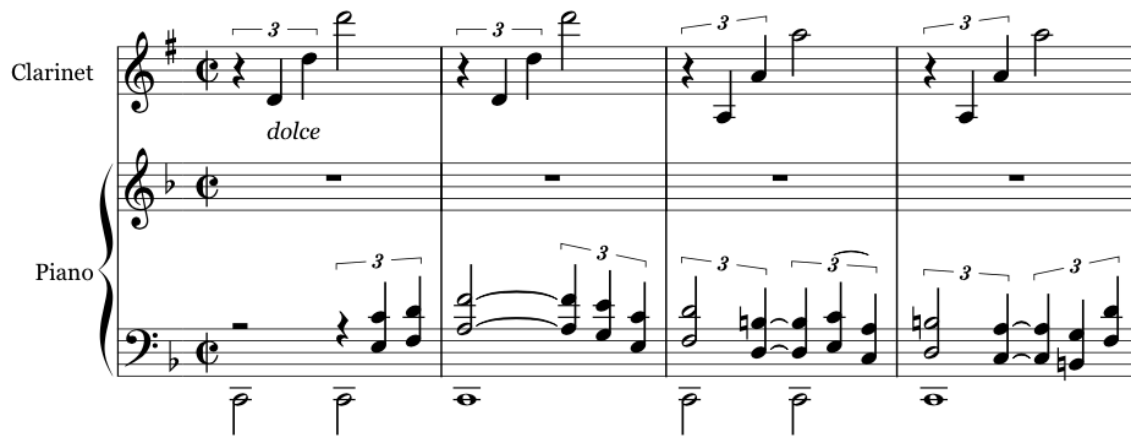


Figure 2.10. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 4, mm. 42-45.

The next set of fragments begins at measure 114 in the material leading up to section C. The fragment, consisting of a simple eighth note followed by a dotted quarter, is heard first in the right hand of the piano for two measures before handing the material off to the clarinet. This transitional section takes the already minimal material used to create the melody in section C and fragments it further, allowing the listener to hear only the second half of what will become the unit of the melody first heard in measure 119. Like in the previous section, the fragment is tossed between the clarinet and the right hand of the piano for four measures before the true start of the melody.



Figure 2.11. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 4, clarinet and piano parts, mm. 115-118.

Reflectiveness

Of the four late style qualities explored in this paper, reflectiveness is the most difficult to recognize and justify because the subjective nature of music allows for many different interpretations of a single phrase or gesture. Other late style qualities similar to reflectiveness include introspection, introversion, isolation, and nostalgia. Reflectiveness is used here to encompass any of these related qualities that represent inward and personal contemplation. The first two movements of the sonata are more reflective in character than the third and fourth, which are brighter and more playful. The bold, passionate character established by the clarinet from its first entrance extends for over thirty measures, which allows for extreme contrast at the first shift in mood that begins in measure 38 in the piano with a two-bar introduction preceding the clarinet's entrance at measure 40. Measure 46, marked *dolce*, is the first truly reflective moment in the piece. The clarinet starts at only *piano* and diminuendos to *pianissimo* in measure 52. The line

descends from a high Bb to a low F, encompassing a wide range over the course of seven measures. The descending eighth notes in measures 48 and 50 echo the descending eighth note triplets heard earlier in measure 33, but now have a completely different mood. This sweet, gentle, and quiet transformation of a previous loud and bold statement is part of what gives the phrase its reflective quality.

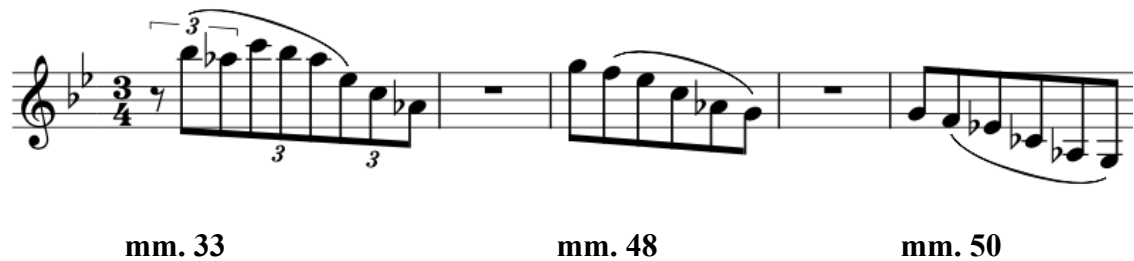


Figure 2.12. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 1, clarinet part, mm. 33, 48, 50.

The last notes in measures 51 and 52 also contribute to this nostalgic, reminiscent air. The falling third (Bb to G) in the chalumeau register recall the first notes of the clarinet's theme in beginning. This metrically displaced echo of the *forte* statement at the clarinet's entrance now played *dolce* quite soft in the richest register of the instrument make the listener (and the performer) think back to the original theme and how the mood has transformed since the start of the movement.



Figure 2.13. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 1, clarinet part, mm. 5.



Figure 2.14. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 1, clarinet part, mm. 51-52.

The section beginning at measure 100, again marked *dolce* and with an extended *sempre pianissimo* section of 12 measures, expands and reflects on the material at measure 46. The sense of revisiting music which itself was already a reflection on previous material gives this section a potent sense of nostalgia and introspection. Brahms further accentuates the contemplative nature of this section with a key change into Fb/E major, the bVI of the relative major (Ab) of the home key F minor.

Perhaps the most reflective moment of the entire piece occurs at measure 206, a phrase so important that it has already been referenced several times. This is the final restatement of the first theme, moving into the major mode for the first time. The quality of reflectiveness is lost as the clarinet crescendos to a C marked *forte*, but the first four measures of this phrase are so striking that the quality need not last long for it to affect the listener. Starting in the rich chalumeau range, the first measure at 206 makes no indication that this repetition will be different from the others except that it is marked *piano*. The B natural in measure 207 and the E naturals in the following measure allow the listener one final meditation on the first theme, transformed from a passionate lament to a gentle, pensive recollection.

The *Andante un poco Adagio* demonstrates elements of reflectiveness in Brahms's treatment of the theme throughout the movement. The first statement of the the theme is presented in the first measure in the clarinet, marked *poco forte* (in both clarinet and piano), and after a short two-measure piano transition is followed by a repetition of the theme, now marked *piano dolce*. This reiteration of the melody with a complete change in mood gives the phrase an echo-like character. The clarinet's fond reminiscence of the previous material with a new perspective gives this piece the sense of nostalgia and memory.

This idea of reminiscence continues throughout the movement. When the theme returns following the B section, it appears with yet another expressive marking, *piano espressivo*. It is also written an octave lower than before, allowing the clarinet to display the richer timbre of the chalumeau register. Like the first movement, Brahms's transformation of the melody to a lower octave allows for the same musical material to affect the listener differently. The ending of the second movement is one of the F Minor Sonata's most reflective moments. In measure 75, the clarinet begins yet again the theme, this time marked *pianissimo*, and still retaining the *dolce* quality called for in measure 59. The clarinet is allowed only four measures of the theme before it dissolves into a sustained D. This note grows longer with each repetition and each time is sustained over the bar line while the piano continues the quiet accompaniment. The clarinet diminuendos through the four sustained notes, continuing to dissipate all the way through the final fermata, when the clarinet changes to the tonic note and slowly fades.

The image shows a musical score for the Clarinet and Piano parts of the second movement of Brahms' Clarinet Sonata in F Minor, measures 75-81. The music is in 2/4 time and F minor. The Clarinet part (top staff) begins with a half note F4, followed by a quarter note G4, and then a trill on A4 in measure 76. It continues with a half note G4, a quarter note F4, and a half note E4 in measure 77. In measure 78, it plays a half note D4, a quarter note C4, and a half note B3. In measure 79, it plays a half note A3, a quarter note G3, and a half note F3. In measure 80, it plays a half note E3, a quarter note D3, and a half note C3. In measure 81, it plays a half note B2, a quarter note A2, and a half note G2. The Piano part (bottom staff) consists of two staves. The right hand plays chords: F4-A3 in measure 75, F4-A3 in measure 76, F4-A3 in measure 77, F4-A3 in measure 78, F4-A3 in measure 79, F4-A3 in measure 80, and F4-A3 in measure 81. The left hand plays single notes: F3 in measure 75, F3 in measure 76, F3 in measure 77, F3 in measure 78, F3 in measure 79, F3 in measure 80, and F3 in measure 81.

Figure 2.15. Brahms, *Clarinet Sonata in F Minor*, movement 2, mm. 75-81.

PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS

This chapter will present a comparison of performances by three well-known clarinetists of different backgrounds. The first is a 1982 recording under RCA Records by Richard Stoltzman, an American clarinetist born in 1942. The second performance is by Karl Leister, a German clarinetist born in 1937. This was released under Orfeo Records in 1984 along with the second sonata in Eb major. The final recording is by Martin Fröst of Sweden, born in 1970. This recording of the sonatas and trio was released in 2005 under the Swedish label BIS Records. A study of each recording includes critical reviews and an analysis of the performance in relation to the score and instructions given by the composer. The reader may observe how different interpretations strengthen or detract from certain aspects of the work, and how individual musical choices by the performers are received by the public.

Richard Stoltzman

Despite his reputation as one of the greatest American classical clarinetists, this recording remains rather controversial among critics and clarinetists. The recording undoubtedly gained plenty of positive recognition, as one of Stoltzman's two Grammy Awards was awarded for this performance. Other

reviews, however, criticize his interpretation harshly, including James Methuen-Campbell, who wrote for Gramophone,

Taking [the clarinet], which has a range of tone-colour greater than that of any other member of the wind family, [Brahms] created two works that principally express a fully ripe autumnal lyricism. This is a subtle mood that eludes the imagination of many interpreters, and I rather feel that Richard Stoltzman is one such player. Stoltzman's instrumental skill cannot be doubted, but his tone has a tendency to be pure to the point of sterility...the endearingly private world of late Brahms is a closed book to them. For instance, despite Stoltzman's wonderful control in the sustained notes of the *Andante* from the F Minor Sonata, his playing sounds rather disembodied and lacking in musical relevance . . . I soon appreciated the essential factor missing in Stoltzman's readings—personality.²⁸

This critique attacks Stoltzman for some of the same qualities heard in Leister's recording, namely an excess purity of tone that detracts from the emotion or personality of the performance. Campbell acknowledges Stoltzman's control in the *Andante*, which seems to be the movement best suited for his playing.

Stoltzman plays the inherently simple melody nicely, not usually going overboard

²⁸ James Methuen-Campbell, review of *Brahms: Sonatas for Clarinet and Piano, Op. 120* recorded by Richard Stoltzman, accessed March 16, 2018, <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/brahms-clarinet-sonatas-2>.

with unnecessary expressive gestures as he tends to do in the first movement. His interpretation of the first theme in the *Allegro appassionato* is rather unpleasant to listen to. Both Leister and Fröst treat the entire line as a single, unbroken, smooth phrase in their own distinct ways; Stoltzman, however, seems to almost treat each measure as a section needing its own phrasing, which severely detracts from the overall smoothness of the line. His insistence upon crescendoing noticeably through every half-note does not produce the expressive effect he may have intended, but rather gives the phrase a discontinuity that does not fit in this piece. Stoltzman's jazz influences are heard in his reedy tone and excessive use of vibrato. Perhaps this American sound is what appeals to some listeners, but it simply does not sound natural in the context of this Romantic piece. Whereas Fröst uses vibrato in a natural way to provide a certain color to his tone like a vocalist or violinist, Stoltzman's vibrato detracts from the smoothness the sonata seems to beg for in a performance. Stoltzman certainly intended to put some of his own style into this piece, but his attempts largely detract from what makes this piece so beautiful.

Karl Leister

A review of the performance by Karl Leister and pianist Gerhard Oppitz of the F Minor Sonata (also released with the Sonata in Eb Major, Op. 120, No. 2) by Stephen Plaistow under Gramophone classical music reviews reads,

As an example of duo playing their record is second to none. As a presentation of these demanding sonatas it's also quite acceptable, but I wish it attempted more. I wish it were bolder in the pursuit of character and not just 'correct.' This . . . music [is] a flux of ideas and settings and developments, in which much is said, or suggested, in a short time. For me, the players don't explore enough of the light and shade. I like the clarinetist's liquid sound and long lines but regret his disinclination to be deflected from what is mellifluous and smooth. The pianist, a powerful player, does many commanding things but he fusses the opening of the F Minor Sonata with unnecessary rubato instead of heeding Brahms's indication to establish an *allegro appassionato* . . . The sound isn't bad but isn't consistent – between movements one and two of the F minor Sonata, for instance.²⁹

As Plaistow mentions, one of the most appealing qualities heard in this recording is the fluidity and smoothness of Leister's tone. From the clarinet's first entrance in movement I, Leister establishes the way in which phrases will be treated throughout the piece. Played as one smooth and continuous phrase with a steady crescendo until the last note, Leister is able to show off his beautifully produced sound. He handles most phrases throughout this piece in a similar way, allowing

²⁹ Stephen Plaistow, review of *Johannes Brahms: The Clarinet Sonatas* recorded by Karl Leister, accessed March 16, 2018, <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/brahms-clarinet-sonatas-1-2>.

them to be as connected and as long as possible. While this functions perfectly in much of the first movement and throughout the second, some sections may have been better suited for shorter phrasing. The theme of the *Allegretto grazioso*, for example, lacks the excitement and dance-like quality when treated as a static line. The charm of the simple, folk-like melody is lost when it is handled with the still, monotonous phrasing which worked so well in the second movement. The purity of Leister's tone does, however, produce wonderful effects during the more reflective movements of the piece. In measure 161 of the first movement at the return of the *dolce* material from the exposition, Leister's clear, sweet tone and ability to maintain it throughout a long phrase fits the mood well. Overall, Leister's treatment of this sonata is undoubtedly done with care and attention to detail, and his natural sound on the instrument produces wonderful moments of reflection and meditation for this listener through lengthy, clean phrases and the ability to maintain a clean sound across a wide range of dynamics and range. The trouble with Leister's performance lies in its perfection. As Plaistow says, Leister lacks the boldness needed to achieve the passion called for in the first movement, the bounce and simplicity of the third movement, and the opportunity for relaying many different emotions within a single line throughout the piece with his excessive "correctness."

Martin Fröst

A negative review of Fröst's performance of the F minor sonata is difficult, if not impossible, to come by. The CD which features the F Minor and Eb Major Sonatas and the Clarinet Trio received glowing reviews from critics upon its release. One of the only negative remarks available is that the microphone occasionally captures Fröst's breathing. David Hurwitz writes for Classics Today,

Martin Fröst is as fine a clarinetist as anyone alive today, and he teams up with two equally superb colleagues in presenting exceptional performances of these three chestnuts of the chamber-music-with-winds repertoire. It's worth keeping in mind that both Brahms sonatas have a movement marked "appassionato," and that is just the feeling that Fröst and Pöntinen bring to the music: a dusky-toned, smoldering quality that always seems ready to ruffle the music's well-groomed surface. I very much appreciate the fact that they also don't overdo the music's autumnal qualities . . . making sure that the First sonata's concluding *vivace* has plenty of vigor and snap. In short, these are magnificent performances, as fine as any available.³⁰

³⁰ David Hurwitz, review of *Brahms: Clarinet Sonatas & Trio* recorded by Martin Fröst, accessed March 16, 2018, <https://www.classicstoday.com/review/review-12447/>.

Another review from BBC Music Magazine of the recording reflects on Fröst's treatment of these sonatas' "autumnal" quality, a common trait of late style music.

The young Swede Martin Fröst plays with elegant phrasing and beautiful, even produced tone . . . In the two sonatas, he's perfectly matched by his compatriot Roland Pöntinen in performances which capture Brahms's serious, autumnal mood without undue heaviness.³¹

Fröst's less constricted and reserved tone does not quite have the careful purity and consistent fullness present in Leister's recording. Fröst's willingness to reach into the many available timbres of the clarinet and explore the opportunity for different characters within individual sections and phrases gives his recording a freer and less mechanical quality than Leister's. Even within the very first phrase, Fröst seizes the listener with his encapsulation of the *appassionato* character called for by Brahms. He achieves a more human quality with his ability to capture many emotions, use of appropriate vibrato, and willingness to take liberties with dynamics and phrasing other than what has been strictly dictated in the score.

³¹ BBC Music Magazine, review of *Brahms: Clarinet Sonatas & Trio* recorded by Martin Fröst, accessed March 16, 2018, <https://www.prestoclassical.co.uk/classical/products/7941585--brahms-clarinet-sonatas-trio#reviews>.

The last two movements best exhibit his musical potential and demonstrate what Leister lacks in comparison. The theme of the third movement is treated wonderfully, with the fourth measure treated as an echo of the previous gesture and a slight weight on the downbeat bringing out the phrase's inherent folk quality. Fröst convincingly chooses to disregard the slurs marked in the two measures preceding the start of the theme's inversion. The dance-like energy here is palpable as he prepares the listener for the loud, jubilant entrance of the inversion. In the final movement too, Fröst perfectly encapsulates the celebratory, fanfare-like nature of the three-note motif with bold accents and a bright tone. He also chooses to rubato the light staccato eight-note theme, allowing the phrase to rush forward with excitement rather than sounding like an articulation exercise. While Fröst's unrestricted sound on the instrument and occasional liberties taken for musical directions may not be textbook-perfect, the effect is outstanding and arrests the listener's attention at once. His recording of the F Minor Sonata is one of the greatest available, and demonstrates that one must take certain liberties with the music in order to make it leave the page and attract the listener's attention. Listening to Fröst play, it is not difficult to imagine the fun Brahms must have had while playing with Mühlfeld.

CONCLUSION

While studying the score and different recordings of the F minor sonata from a research viewpoint, I also have been preparing this work as a performer. Learning more about the importance of the clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld as a source of inspiration for Brahms gave me a better understanding of the historical context in which this piece was written. Disability/late style theory has been applied to major works of many composers, including Brahms, but very little research exists regarding this theory as it relates to his Op. 120. The F Minor Sonata provides ample opportunity for late style analysis, and studying this piece has given me new creative ideas which I have put to use in my performance preparation. Four major late style characteristics in this work (simplicity, economy, fragmentation, and reflectiveness) appear throughout and are largely responsible for the piece's often-referenced "autumnal" quality. Brahms has provided the performer with sufficient performance instructions through tempo, dynamic, and expressive markings. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the performer to determine what aspects of the music should be emphasized. Through score study and performance analysis, I have gained a better understanding of the work and formulated my own interpretation of the F Minor Sonata. I hope that future clarinetists studying this

work will be able to use this research to guide them in their interpretation and performance decisions.

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